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Curating a public self: Exploring social media images of women in the outdoors

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Curating a public self: Exploring social media images of women in the outdoors

Abstract:

Two recent social media posts¹ about the authenticity of women's experiences in the outdoors fuelled an intense dialogue among the authors of this paper. These posts sparked healthy debate and we asked ourselves, '*Why does our apparel, our aesthetical appeal, our physicality, or even our motivations become subject to critique and judgment?*' The burgeoning use of social media, in particular, the use of Instagram and Facebook to curate a public self, has provided the catalyst for our study. This paper explores the use of online presence by women in the outdoors and examines how social media is portraying those women. In particular, we examined the authenticity of Instagram and Facebook in representing identities. We also interrogated the potential of social media to contribute to the commodification and aestheticisation of what it means to be a woman in the outdoors, using current social media literature as a point of departure and Goffman as a theoretical lens. Findings were mixed; some images perpetuated the aestheticisation of women outdoors, while others provided inspiring, strength-based portrayals. Such findings implicate the unremitting need to deconstruct negative aspects of social media images of women in the outdoors, and develop a new lens to a) assess the positive aspects of social media images of women in the outdoors; b) counteract the negative self-perceptions generated by mainstream media images; and c) allow for positive self-representation.

Keywords: Social media, outdoor experience, outdoor pursuit, authenticity, outdoor women.

¹<http://www.tetongravity.com/story/adventure/is-this-real-life-outdoor-women-on-social-media>

<http://www.mymountaintherapy.com/blog/2015/11/6/my-adventure-is-more-real-than-your-adventure>

Introduction

This paper is one of few studies to bring gender, social media, self-image and outdoor pursuits and experience together, and explores the use of online platforms as a tool to curate a public self and/or image. It questions social media representations of women in the outdoors as a potential factor and contributor towards their commodification and aestheticisation. Research presented examines the images found of women on the social media sites Instagram and Facebook. We developed this research following our reading and collective examination of an online discussion post on this topic. Our exchange warranted a more formal representation both as a comment on the nature of social media within outdoor pursuits and as an opportunity to consider the way(s) in which this form of visual culture and curation of a public self may influence female participation. This paper acknowledges the increasing influence of social media in quotidian discourse, and provides a theoretical analysis utilizing Goffman's presentation of self to suggest that in some cases women could utilise social media to challenge and change the cultural narrative. We posit that social media can, in some cases, positively deconstruct dominant narratives about women in the outdoors by creating a platform for realistic, inclusive and empowering digital portraits.

We use the term 'outdoors' in this paper to encompass the terms outdoor education, recreation and outdoor pursuits and, as we cannot be clear about the pedagogical depth of the activity portrayed in each image, we focus only on the static image representation.

Background: Current Trends in Social Media

Social media is both pervasive and ingrained into our daily life (Maher, Ryan, Kernot, Podsiadly, & Keenihan, 2016). With ease of engagement and high usage patterns universally, the online culture provides a fertile resource for social science researchers (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Contemporary culture relies heavily on the exchange of visual information,

especially the photographic image (Ibrahim, 2015). Images are powerful means of conveying messages that are coded according to, and embedded within, social, cultural and ideological contexts. Mitchell (2002) explains that, “visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision” as images reveal the sociology of everyday life and communicate our subconscious thoughts and feelings (p. 170). Social media continues to be a leading form of communication with over a dozen types of social networking platforms. To this end, Ibrahim (2015) offers, “the visual turn enabled through mobile telephony and convergence of technologies elongates this trajectory where imaging everyday life becomes an integral part of our identity construction, communication and sustenance of relationships today” (p. 43).

The most popular platform of social networking internationally is Facebook, with 1.59 billion users recorded in April, 2016.² Facebook also continues to be the most engaging social network, with an average of 15 days accessed monthly per account and Instagram follows closely with an average of 11 days accessed monthly.² Instagram dominates social media platforms when looking at different interaction—it has the most interaction per 1000 followers.³ Interestingly, social media use on photo sharing sites like Instagram are often dominated by women. Based on internet market research, 42 percent of Instagram’s 108 million unique visitors were male, while 58 percent were female (Nguyen, 2016). Women seem drawn to the use of digital storytelling, as a means of sharing their personal narratives through photographs. When asked to comment on telling women’s stories in an authentic way during the recent #MyStory initiative, Marne Levine, Instagram CEO said:

² <http://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>

² <http://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>

³ <http://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>

Instagram is all about visual storytelling, and women are not only incredible storytellers, but they have really important stories and perspectives to share, these images really transcend age, culture, country — no matter what — and people really understand and are able to be motivated and inspired by the different stories that women tell.⁴

As outdoorswomen using social media platforms, we acknowledge that when we post images of ourselves engaging in outdoor pursuits we reinforce our own narratives of strength, challenge and adventure, and connection with the natural world. Much like writing, the images we post on social media help us “construct our reality around stories. We get to decide who we want to be, what values we want to stand behind” (Maisel, 2016, p. 7). In other words we curate a public self, and in doing so we can create a duality between who we are and the image of who we want to project publicly; authentic representation versus aspirational presentation (see Rettberg (2017) for a discussion of representation and presentation in relation to internet studies).

Despite our positive perspective on the more empowering use of social media, prior research has shown that the culture of sharing pictures of everyday, often ‘banal’, activities through images and posts may reinforce the commodification and aestheticisation of ourselves (Ibrahim, 2015; Rosewarne, 2005). As a contemporary form of digital visual culture, social media works to construct the self through self-presentation and representation in the digital world. We also ask if engagement with social media — in particular Facebook and Instagram — juxtaposes our motivation to acquire social capital through validation of our ‘posts’ and our complicity in the way women are portrayed in the outdoors through mainstream media?

Deconstructing Images of Women in the Outdoors in Mainstream Media

Although not a social media research analysis, the two magazines studied by McNiel, Harris and Fondren (2012) have a clear online presence with strong Instagram followings

⁴ <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/10/27/instagram-mystory-initiative-feminism-hollywood>

(Backpacker: 395,000 and Outside: 619,000). McNiel et al considered the portrayal of women in 42 issues of Backpacker and Outside magazines and discovered that women were predominantly depicted to have limited capacities and played passive roles in outdoor settings. They noticed that women were underrepresented and when presented they served to reinforce traditional gender depictions. Those that broke away from the mould had to be established as 'unique' women and were additionally feminised to conform to social gender role prescriptions. The impact of viewing these women in media worked to inhibit women's participation and downplayed their potential and competence (Burns, 2015).

Strengthening this argument, Henderson-King, Henderson-King & Hoffman (2001) examined how women psychologically process images presented in media. Their findings suggest that women believe physical aesthetics to be of great importance. Women had appearance expectations and standards of comparison which they formed based on images presented in media (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2015). Social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook provide a bountiful ground for envy and resentment Appel et al., 2015). Most women after viewing ideal body images felt greater body dissatisfaction and decreased self-worth. Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis and Kruck (2012) examined the socio-psychological differences in the way men and women perceive themselves and others on social networking sites. Their study showed that women were significantly more aware and concerned about others' perceptions of them. They spent more energy and thought towards self-presentations than men and were more likely to engage in comparing themselves with others.

Examining the negative self-perceptions generated by mainstream media images of women in the outdoors informs our research as it helps us to understand and, perhaps, reveal some of the internal motivations behind women's use of social media as a way of documenting involvement in outdoor pursuits and curating a public self that stands in contrast to the way we

are often portrayed in the outdoors via mainstream media. In this way, women may actually have more control over how our identities are co-created by what we post on social media.

Curating a Public Self: The Co-Creation of Identity on Social Media

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) found that the primary motivation for young adults to use Instagram was to gain knowledge of others, document events and experiences and to gain social appeal by appearing cool and creative. This concept is not new, and based on earlier sociological research, may also apply to social media users of various ages and genders. Sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley's (1998) concept of the 'looking glass self' (see Cooley & Schubert, 1998) suggests that a person's self grows out of a person's social interaction with others. According to Cooley and Schubert (1998) this view of ourselves is based on impressions of how others perceive us and how we believe others see us. Cooley and Schubert (1998) theorized that we form our self-image as we reflect on the response of others in our environment. This is not dissimilar to the present day interactions we have via social media networks. Sheldon and Bryant's (2016) survey of 239 college students revealed that the main reasons for Instagram use are 'Surveillance/Knowledge about others,' 'Documentation,' 'Coolness,' and 'Creativity'. Popular social media user and blogger, Courtney Seiter (2015) suggests that Instagram exemplifies the 'looking-glass self' particularly in regards to the concept of 'selfies'. She suggests "The more pictures you post of yourself promoting a certain identity—buff, sexy, adventurous, studious, funny, daring, etc. the more likely it is that others will endorse this identity of you" (Seiter, 2015). This idea reaffirms Papacharissi's (2013) research which shows that social media is a stage for self-presentation and social connection, which reinforce each other, and is directly related to Rosewarne (2005) and Ibrahim's (2015) belief that social media is used as a tool to reflect a desire to commodify and aestheticise self-identity.

Some researchers suggest that the 'selfie' is more than just a creative expression of self. Murray (2015) examines the depth and motivation behind the selfie phenomenon. He proposes

that when seen as a collective, the selfie `movement` represents a political shift towards “an aggressive reclaiming of the female body” that is “designed to embrace femininity and sexuality; celebrate the history of women; reject unhealthy beauty standards promoted by the media; and advance a body-positive attitude” (Murray, 2015, p. 490). His view shuns the common interpretation of posting and sharing selfies as a narcissistic self-absorbed activity endorsing the superficiality of self-imaging and a cult of consumerism and media fixation. Hogan (2010) on the other hand posits that social networking sites in our contemporary context are not merely spaces for social interaction, but are ‘exhibition spaces’ where individuals create ‘artifacts’ that they showcase to their close peer network and the wider world.

Goffman’s Theory of Self-Presentation Applied to Social Media

Erving Goffman’s seminal work *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is often used to provide theoretical framing in social media studies (see for example, Hinton and Hjorth, 2013, Smith and Sanderson, 2015, and Rettberg, forthcoming). Goffman offers a way to consider how we present ourselves in certain situations and, despite writing before the emergence of social media, his work translates into the online context as it relates to how we manage our presence. His dramaturgical analyses, referring to our front and backstage posturing has connotations of our online and offline self. This act can lead to a polarised presentation of self with individuals upholding a more considered and managed `front-stage` performance (online) of self and a less orchestrated, more private `backstage` presentation of self (offline). Goffman refers to a negotiation between the front and backstage presentations of self and highlights the complexity involved in these negotiations. Smith and Sanderson (2015 p.344), reinforce this posturing by describing the “multitude of presentation strategies a person seeks to manage through a revolving process of interpreting audiences, goals and contexts”. This concept was researched by Smith and Sanderson (2015) in relation to the visual portrayal of professional athletes on Instagram. Their study deduced that most athletes were strategically

using Instagram for self-presentation, brand-promotion/endorsements and portraying a certain public image. When young audiences view these highly staged presentations and images, they can be disillusioned into believing they represent an absolute reality (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

We have taken Goffman's notion of self-presentation and his front and backstage analogy as a theoretical framework for this study. We are building on others (such as Hinton and Hjorth, 2013, Smith and Sanderson, 2015) who have repositioned his theories in relation to social media and we are moving it into the domain of outdoor pursuits by considering the on and offline presentation of the female outdoors and what this may mean in terms of encouraging and sustaining female participation in the field.

However, in doing so, we must ask the question, "How tightly can we couple the identity of someone online with the offline activities of that person?" This question emerged after we read the original opinion piece by Caroline Highlands. She considers the visual representation of women on Instagram:

You've probably seen it before. The classic wide-angle shot of a woman standing in front of a sweeping vista, waist-length hair tucked under a backwards hat or beanie made by a small start-up gear company, patterned-legging bedecked legs that don't touch, accompanied by a generic quote telling you what happiness is⁵.

Highlands writes in her piece "I think it comes down to whether your Instagram is about your life, or if your life is about your Instagram." In rebuttal, Holly Johnson wrote:

You might read that and immediately think "yes, so true," and I agree... I hope nobody is so wrapped up in Instagram and social media that they forget to really live their life, but I don't think that is what is happening *here* and the examples given in the article in no way reflect such a statement.⁶

Johnson believes, in regards to posting: "It's whatever you want it to be."

⁵ <http://www.tetongravity.com/story/adventure/is-this-real-life-outdoor-women-on-social-media>

⁶ <http://www.mymountaintherapy.com/blog/2015/11/6/my-adventure-is-more-real-than-your-adventure>

Although Goffman's work from the 1950s was not related to new media tools, his thoughts directly relate to the exchange noted above and our own thoughts as outdoorswomen using social media. Goffman outlined self-presentation as typically a goal-oriented, balancing act that requires individuals to manage personal goals with those of their audiences, and this posturing between the on and offline self is where we are focusing our attention. We also wish to state at this early stage that we are interested in exploring the experiences and representation of all females outdoors, from the elite athlete to those who enjoy the outdoors at a more leisurely pace; we take an inclusive position, only limiting our gaze by focusing on the female participant and their activity in the outdoors.

Method

As one of the first studies of this kind, this research must be framed in an exploratory nature. According to Phillips (2017), social media research is not really conducive to experimental research, but it does allow researchers to study unobtrusively how people behave in real life. So though we will not be able to generalize the findings of this study, we can use data we collect to observe what is occurring online, and challenge and deconstruct dominant narratives about women in the outdoors so that images on social media can become more realistic, inclusive and empowering.

We conducted a mixed-method analysis of contemporary cultural and popular 'texts' that are publicly available on social media. These 'texts' can be considered as influential sites of possible knowledge production informing perspectives and defining experiences of women in the outdoors. We then collected our data (the cultural texts), via Facebook posts and Instagram. We analyzed data utilizing two separate hashtags: #NatureGirls and #outdoorwomen. These hashtags were chosen for their simplicity and direct relationship to our focus on women in the outdoors. Choosing and creating a hashtag in itself is complex,

depending on intended purposes (brand marketing, audience reach, or awareness raising etc.) and no rules or protocols exist in choosing the ‘best’ one. For research purposes we wanted to choose simple hashtags to explore. We utilized varied data analysis techniques of each hashtag in order to expand our lens for exploring social media images of women outdoors through a mixed-methods approach. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzi (2004), a mixed-methods approach includes “methodological pluralism or eclecticism, which frequently results in superior research (compared to monomethod research)” (p. 14).

For the hashtag #NatureGirls on FaceBook, we chose to thematically analyze and quantify the images we collected into basic categories. We reviewed and analyzed a total of 63 posts and grouped them under the following categories: advertisements; alone in nature; together in nature; nature only; and other. Then, within those categories, we analyzed the content to quantify how many women of color, men, and children were represented and how many of the posts were overtly sexual in nature, as determined by the inclusion of imagery, themes or material that is not suitable for minors, such as sexual content, sexual acts, or depictions of sexual arousal.

For the hashtag #outdoorwomen on Instagram, we chose a more qualitative approach to analyzing individual images, which we include in this study so that the reader can engage in the analysis with us. We also analyzed the popularity of posts and comments that followers made about their favorite images of women in the outdoors. In this way, we can begin to collaboratively interpret the meaning of these images and the role they play in the curating of a public self. Just as Smith and Sanderson (2015) examined with their work on elite athletes, we too explore the authenticity of Instragram photos and the potential that they are being used for portraying a particular ‘self’. By examining the experiences of outdoors women who use Instagram to showcase their outdoor pursuits, a better understanding of the concept of self-presentation in social media may be gained.

In terms of ethical concerns, though many visual images on the internet are considered public domain, we sought permission from the women who posted them. This was achieved via Instagram, email and Facebook messages sent to their personal online accounts. We also submitted our study for internal review and ethics exemption approval through the Western Sydney University which was formally granted on October 30, 2017.

Findings: #NatureGirls

Our choice to analyze the hashtag #NatureGirls in the aforementioned categories was an attempt to first identify what kinds of images are being presented and who is included in these images. Table 1 reveals the findings from our categorical, quantitative analysis of the hashtag #NatureGirls.

Table 1. A Review of #NatureGirls

Type of Post	Children	Women of Color	Men	Sexual Content	Total = 63
Advertisements				1	8
Alone in Nature			1		11
Together in Nature	20	12			35
Nature Alone					7
Other					2

It is striking that over 50% of all posts were about *being together in nature*. This goes against the traditional ‘rugged individualism’ that permeates the often hypermasculine world of outdoor pursuits (Gray & Mitten, 2018; Gray, Mitten, Loeffler, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2017; Gray, Taylor, Norton, Breault-Hood & Christie, 2016; Mitten, Gray, Carpenter, Loeffler & Carpenter, 2018). Of those posts of women together in nature, 57% included children. Many of the posts that included children were of mothers and children spending time together in nature, and others were groups of girls enjoying time playing outside and exploring nature. It

is also important to note that 34% of the images of women being together outdoors were women of color. This is salient because women of color are underrepresented in activities that take place outdoors (Roberts & Henderson, 1997). In our analysis of the photos of women being together in nature, we observed a sense of connection in all of these pictures, a theme that reaffirms Pohl, Borrie & Patterson's study (2000), showing that a transferable outcome of women's time spent in nature is connection to others.

The other posts also revealed interesting themes. In analyzing the "alone in nature" posts, we found that these posts were more solemn and reflective and showed women (and one man) taking 'time out' to be in nature to reconnect with themselves and the natural world. In analyzing the 'nature only' posts, we found a deep sense of awe and appreciation for the natural world. Not surprisingly, the advertisements that portrayed images of women outdoors were overly focused on traditional concepts of beauty and women's sexuality, and the 'other' category was art or memes related to the natural world.

Findings: #outdoorwomen

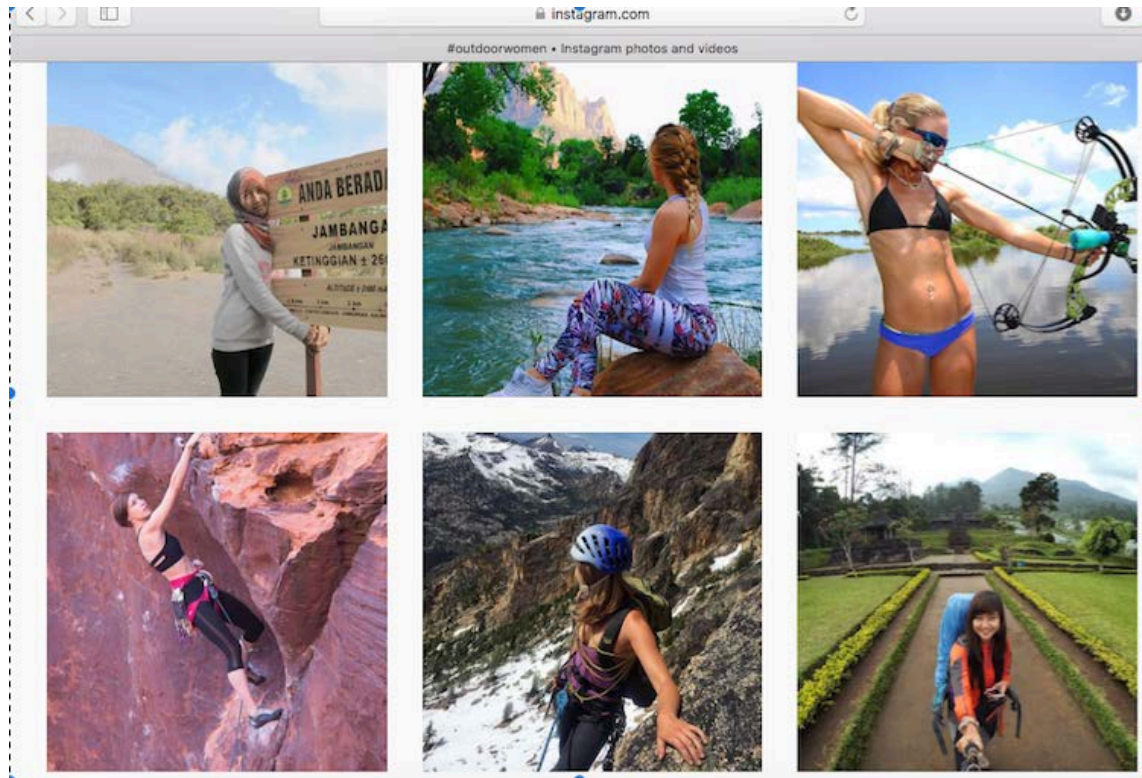
We also reviewed the hashtag #outdoorwomen on Instagram. The hashtag #outdoorwomen had 353,155 posts on April 17, 2016 and 413,498 posts on June 16, 2016. In two months time, 60,343 people used the hashtag #outdoorwomen on Instagram, reinforcing the popularity of using Instagram as a means of sharing photos. Upon opening an Instagram feed, the user can access nine posts before loading more photos, so we chose first to load these nine photos and chose the five top performing Instagram posts, based on how many likes they had received. Figure 1 provides examples of Instagram posts loaded during our research study.

Curating a public self: Exploring social media images of women in the outdoors

Figure 1 Collage of Photos from outdoor women on Instagram



Curating a public self: Exploring social media images of women in the outdoors



The top five performing posts based on the numbers of likes were from the following:

1. wulandarishevya: 5,656 Likes (Unable to analyze comments as they were not in English)
2. alpinebabes: 4,404 likes
3. harmonycalhoun: 2,248 likes
4. darcizzle: 1,872 likes
5. staciangeliques: 1,551 likes June 16, 2016 and 3,032 on June 19, 2016.

As part of the analysis of these images, we scrolled through the comments on each of these posts and observed mixed public reaction. We were unable to read through the comments on wulandarishevya's feed due to language differences; however, it was noted that she received the most likes. She is also one of three women of colour in the nine Instagram feeds, reflecting a similar percentage (about 30%) of women of color included in the #NatureGirls images. However, different from the #NatureGirl images on FaceBook, all of the Instagram images that we analyzed were of women alone in nature.

Curating a public self: Exploring social media images of women in the outdoors

A photo from Alpine Babes (see Figure 2) had 4,404 likes; however, some of the comments on the feed included ‘Somebody get this girl some hiking boots!’ and ‘I agree! And they aren’t even tied. Her shirt and hair is too pristine also this is ridiculous!’ demonstrating criticism and a lack of taking her seriously. Though seated peacefully in a beautiful natural environment, she is scrutinized by others for being less equipped to handle the rigors of hiking and her image is viewed as unrealistic compared to what one might really look like if actually hiking in the mountains: boots muddy, shirt sweaty, tousled, sweaty hair. But others seem to connect with the peace that emanates from the photo, and are especially connected to the familiarity of the place where the photo was taken, with one person even giving others directions for how to find that exact spot. Based on these opposing views, it is hard to uncover the intentions for why this photo was posted, but we can observe the scrutiny that this woman experiences for expressing herself in this image in this way.

Figure 2 Photo from Alpine Babes



As a social media platform, Instagram has many layers. As researchers, we can begin by choosing hashtags to examine, which can lead us to individual’s Instagram feeds. We can

then decide to follow a feed that we want to explore further. Figure 3 are two photos from Harmony Calhoun's post. On the day of the initial screenshot, this Instagram post had 2,248 likes. Revisiting the next screenshot two days later, the post had increased its likes to 2,487, totaling 239 new likes in only two days. The first photo shows Harmony's comments, focused on the message she wants to share with her post, that "climbing teaches us lessons useful in other areas of life." The second photo shows a few reactions of her followers: "Beautiful," "Pretty Climber," "Fantastic shot, make it look effortless". These reactions seem to be a mixed response focused both on her looks and her climbing effort. We decided to investigate Harmony Calhoun's page more in depth and discovered that she is a model and a rock climber. She has three Instagram accounts, a public Facebook page, a blog and is active on Twitter. The layers of social media allow participants to have many different 'selves' or 'identities'. For Harmony, coming from the younger generation, she capitalizes on social media as she 'curates' three different selves in the public eye.

Figure 3: Two photos from Harmony Calhoun's post

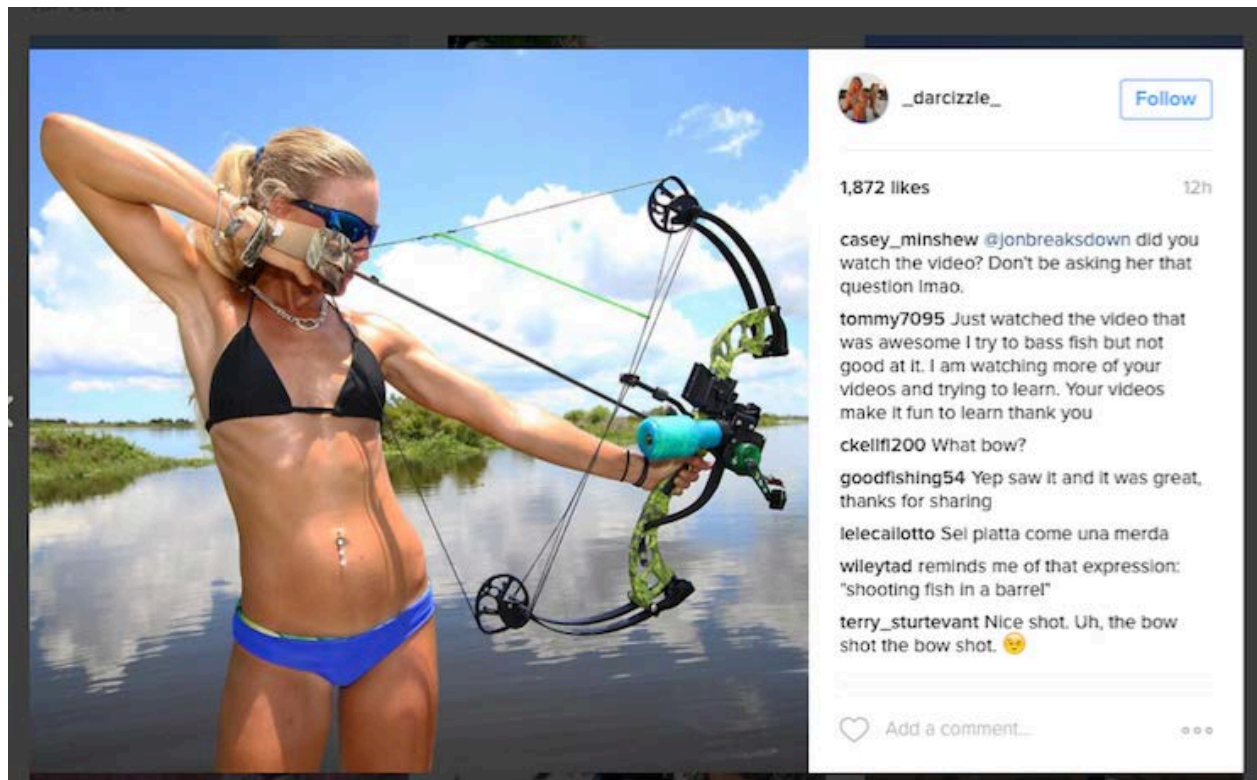




In this feed, we see commodification and aestheticisation, but we also see inspiration. Harmony Calhoun is advertising the clothes she is wearing, and she is presenting a traditional, Western aesthetics of beauty, but she is also sharing lessons learned from climbing that convey a certain vulnerability, which then inspires others following her posts.

Figure 4, from Darcizzle's feed, received the next number of likes. The image shows a woman in a bikini shooting a cross bow. Darcizzle is a female angler in Florida, USA who promotes YouTube videos on her web page. Her mission statement is to "prove that females, children, and young anglers alike can discover the secrets of fishing and accomplish their angling goals" (Darcizzle, n.d.). Out of the sixteen comments on this Instagram post 13/14 were from women, most of which were very positive and supportive. However, we wish to highlight the sexualized nature of some of the comments made on this photo simply due to what she is wearing and her athletic physique, and challenge the notion that a woman should be objectified for these reasons.

Figure 4: Darcizzle's feed



The feed with the next amount of likes was from Staciangeliques (see Figure 5). On June 16, 2016 it had 1,551 likes and on June 19, 2016 it had risen to 3,032 likes. Staciangeliques is Stacia Glenn, a “This World Exists” adventure ambassador (“Meet Stacia,” 2015). This World Exists is a travel adventure company that focuses on adventure experiences to support sustainable education projects in the developing world. Most of the 90 comments on this Instagram post were positive and were directed at Stacia’s initial comment on her past injury (see Photo 8): “Yeah girl! Thanks for the inspiration,” “I like what you said. Wish I had balls to climb like you do,” “Good for you for climbing back on that horse!” This image of Stacia mountaineering again after a difficult setback and the resulting comments demonstrate a value for resilience and stamina among women in the outdoors, and present a new facet of social media images of women in the outdoors, which are not only used to curate one’s own self-identity, but also to inspire others. Though the scope of this paper does not explore this phenomenon in depth, we believe this could be another area of future research.

Figure 5: Feed from Staciangeliques post



Discussion

The data we collected from Facebook and Instagram show a variety of social media images of women in the outdoors, as well as critiques made by online followers. These conflicting images and the varied responses generated, tell us there is no one way that social media images of women in the outdoors can be categorized. Some images show women together, while others show women standing, climbing, hiking alone. The images on Facebook seem less manicured and focused on commodification and aestheticization than the images on Instagram, which may be in part that they are images that are not connected to sponsoring a clothing line or an outdoor product. Likewise, the images posted on Instagram seem more focused on a traditional, Western aesthetic of beauty, and portray women who's appearance is unaffected by their outdoor pursuits. Though the Instagram posts above only look at nine #outdoorwomen

Instagram posts, out of those nine, there are only three that are women of colour. Out of those nine, there are zero that show women who are looking as though they have been physically active, for example, they are not sweating and they don't have unruly hair. Perhaps the differences between the Facebook and Instagram images reflect Goffman's (1959) front and backstage presentations of self and highlight the complexity involved in these negotiations.

But shouldn't we all just be thrilled that women are being represented in the world of outdoor social media? Shouldn't women be encouraged to get outside in whatever way they choose to do it? We should be, but on terms that are realistic, inclusive and empowering. If you continue to browse through the #outdoorwomen posts, it's rare to see a woman who isn't well groomed. It's rare to find any evidence whatsoever that women might actually do things like sweat, or develop a rat's nest in their hair. For the authors of this paper, the outdoors has been a place where we have not had to worry about how we look, and it's a place where we have felt comfortable and confident to be ourselves; such spaces are rare. Perhaps, the issue is that as women discover the benefits of getting outside, we need to find ways to ensure the outdoors doesn't become one more place for us to judge each others' appearances, and our own, especially as we document these experiences through images on social media.

Deconstructing Negative Aspects of Social Media Images of Women in the Outdoors

Reflecting on the data collected, our conversations as co-authors yielded the discovery that one reason we post about outdoor activities through social media is to remind ourselves that we are strong, vibrant and engaged with life, not simply to declare it to our online audiences. Internet self-presentation reminds us of our motives and deepest values. However, as we increasingly use social media platforms to share our deepest thoughts and feelings, we can feel pressured to curate a presentation of self that is typically goal-oriented and highly performative (Goffman, 1959). The construction of idealized bodies in media endorses guilt-inducing messages, stigmatization, objectifying connotations and unhealthy restricted eating.

Creating and sharing personal content on social networking websites often places pressure on individuals to aestheticize everyday activities and their bodies; in an attempt, often consciously and or subconsciously, to conform to standards often set by mass media. These concerns were reaffirmed by the data we collected, we were troubled by the burgeoning use of social media to curate a public self through idealized eyes, particularly on Instagram. Social media can create a sense of dependence on these networks, a feeling that posting online about an event is necessary to reinforce a conviction that *the experience happened*, and that *it had meaning*.

We were further troubled by the gender inequities that persist within social media images. Our analysis of comments to social media posts revealed that women's appearance is disproportionately scrutinized in nature-based activities – by both men and women – as if these activities should be judged as magazine photo shoots. For the authors, as women who have worked in the outdoor industry, we believe these trends in online communication challenge the authority of women's experiences of the outdoors in ways significantly different to men's. Aesthetic appearance of women is subjected to more intense examination and analysis than their male counterpart.

A New Lens: Positive Aspects of Social Media Images of Women in the Outdoors

Though our data elicited concerns about some of the negative aspects of social media, we also found positive aspects of women posting images of themselves outdoors, particularly on Facebook, where they seem less constrained by commodification and aestheticization than on Instagram. In half of the Facebook images we analyzed, women chose to portray themselves together in nature, conveying a sense of joy, connection and biophilia (Wilson, 1984). Women posted pictures of themselves and others smiling, laughing, playing or exploring nature, often with their children. One has to wonder if by posting these positive images, women are intentionally archiving and appreciating fulfilling moments in their lives in order to enhance their own sense of wellbeing. Certainly, the positive psychology literature supports this idea,

that by focusing on things in our lives that are positive, we can enhance our own personal happiness (Seligman, 2004). Seligman refers to this as exercising our signature strengths, and believes it is a way we can all develop a more authentic sense of happiness.

Our analysis revealed other positive aspects about social media images of women in the outdoors related to the use of women's outdoor adventures to engage and inspire others: to experience the solitude and peace of nature, to physically challenge themselves, and to overcome adversity. Through this, we can see the reciprocal interaction between the image we present of ourselves and the validation we get from inspiring others with this image; such consanguinity affects the way we see ourselves, i.e., "I am someone who inspires others.". Again, this relates to Goffman's dramaturgical process of negotiation between our front and backstage self, and highlights the degree of reciprocity at play where the online presentation of self positively affirms the offline, more hidden other.

Though we caution against constructing identities solely based on what others think about us, we believe that these positive aspects of social media images of women in the outdoors have the power to create a new lens through which we present and respond to one another. We have the opportunity through social media connectivity to offer an alternative path forward or broaden the range of representations that exist. One of these could be looking towards emotional resolve and self-care as opposed to the perfect body. Another could be depicting women in the outdoors with sweat, cuts and grazes and messy hair. Another is to display grit in the face of the challenges inherent in many outdoor pursuits (as seen in Figure 6), not for the sake of bragging rights, but for the sake of cultivating a focus on our own strength and stamina that can transfer into our everyday lives. In this way, social media gives people the chance to change the cultural narrative.

Figure 6: Women in the outdoors with sweat, cuts and grazes and messy hair



We also encourage changing the cultural narratives of women in the outdoors through online support groups. Social media provides a way to develop communities that seek to empower and support females to pursue outdoor pursuits. For example sites such as SisuGirls have an online global community (through Facebook and Instagram) that is passionate about developing *sisu* (a Finnish word for bravery, determination and resilience) in girls through sport and adventure. The pictures posted on their various social media platforms are shared by women and girls who believe their images capture *sisu* and demonstrate their strength and adventurous qualities. The sole purpose of such communities is to provide a non-judgmental space for the celebration of the female outdoors. Also, Women in Wilderness Leadership is a group on Facebook that supports the development of female leaders in the outdoor industry and posts cutting edge research and achievements by women in the outdoors, more so than outdoor images. These groups may help balance the pressures of commodification and aestheticization that women in the outdoors face when engaging with social media.

Limitations include potential for bias in data analysis, as well as a limited review of all social media sites including images of women in the outdoors

Conclusion

This study grew from a fertile online conversation between the authors of this paper around a social media post, and led to an formal examination of prominent social media posts of women in the outdoors. Cognisant of the growing use of online platforms our intention was to respond to the current discourse by formalising our thinking and challenging the dominant narrative of commodification and aestheticization by exploring the opportunities social media may provide for inspiration, authenticity and inclusion. Goffman's Self Representation Theory (1959) formed the theoretical frame of this paper, and his thoughts on motivations are useful as we move to a conclusion. He asserts that performances are controlled actions that an individual does to persuade others' perceptions of themselves. An individual plays out an actual experience via their body language, facial expressions, within a particular social setting. Goffman calls the person in this performance the 'mask' and explains that the theatrical display created by the mask allows the performer to express what they want their audience to see, whether real or not. This is the concept of the 'front' stage and the 'backstage' where the 'actor' (the social media postee) knows they are being watched (followed), as evidenced in the Instagram feeds and Facebook posts we have investigated, where the degree of anonymity afforded by digital space perhaps affords a greater or more heightened sense of 'mask'. The 'unknown' or limitation of this research is understanding the postees' true motive (do they have a backstage persona) and also understanding the motives behind the followers' comments. In accord with Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) we believe further longitudinal and experimental research is needed to ascertain if social media is detrimental to people's body image concerns.

A final conclusion relates to the existence of a code in social media 'posting or gramming', similar to Goffman's ideas in self-representation theory. Is the social media postee withholding true information – perhaps shared only with the photographer in the backstage space? If this authenticity is revealed does it destroy the purpose of the 'gram'? We could infer

that all of the Facebook and Instagram ‘actors’ carefully constructed their photograph selection on their feeds reflecting what they want to project from their personal lives yet remaining incongruous with their reality. Goffman’s theory looks at the ways individuals perform and put on facades for an audience just as we have witnessed in our research, arguing that as social beings, people consciously ‘perform’ identities for self-seeking purposes.

Furthermore, Goffman (1959) suggested that the behaviour and actions of one person can influence the trajectory of behaviour or actions that involves others. For example, an individual may be manipulative in the hopes of presenting themselves in a better light than what is authentic. A person can also unintentionally direct a given situation in a desired direction. For example, an outdoor enthusiast may post self-portraits (or “selfies”) of their outdoor pursuits to direct the viewer’s attention to the individual’s aesthetics. The viewer, in response may see egotism, the need for self approval or perhaps be inspired or motivated to do the same thing. The response of the viewer according to Goffman (1959) is largely determined by societal influences and may be varied depending on their particular background. This is evident in the comments we read in the various social media posts investigated.

But regardless of the motives both of those who post and those who comment on social media, we need to return to our starting point: ***‘Shouldn’t we all just be thrilled that women are being represented in the world of outdoor social media? Shouldn’t women be encouraged to get outside in whatever way they choose to do it?’*** As outdoor enthusiasts, the authors of this paper answer with a resounding “Yes!” We celebrate women in the outdoors, and women who portray their outdoor experiences on social media, regardless of clothing, equipment, body image, colour, shape, size or (mis)interpretations of authenticity! However, further research needs to be conducted around several emergent themes. First, juxtaposing self-posted material with mainstream media of women in the outdoors. From our preliminary findings we posit there is MORE diversity (almost 20%) in self-posted material then in the

regular media. Second, a significant number of posts were of mothers and children spending time together in nature, whilst others were groups of girls enjoying time playing outside and exploring nature. Exploring the meaning behind these selected images could reveal intriguing results.

Following our investigations, we return to the need for further discussion; we provide no neat conclusion to what is ultimately an ongoing, emergent and lively debate. We are aware that there are limitations to this research, including potential for bias in data analysis, as well as a limited review of all social media sites including images of women in the outdoors. However, what we do offer are suggestions for further interpretation and analysis as we go forward as outdoor women. We suggest that social media is both friend and foe, it can work for and against us. As individuals we can choose to curate an online profile and we can choose how we interpret the profiles of others. However, if one of our goals, as people who enjoy a life spent outside, is to encourage others to join us in this pleasure, then we should find ways to embrace the positive aspects of quotidian social media by actively challenging, shaping and deconstructing dominant narratives about women in the outdoors. One way to take action would be to remove the 'mask', to portray our true self and to flood these digital spaces with realistic, inclusive and empowering digital portraits.

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